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ABSTRACT

In this position paper the author examines truth in government. Examination of recent political events, especially in areas of foreign policy, reveals that the government has assumed the right to decide what truths are to be told and when they are to be told. To return to the principles developed by the members of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, the government must become one of laws and not of men. Today it is possible for men in government to become greater than the laws they have sworn to uphold. The problems of secrecy in government will not be solved until increased attention is given to refurbishing and bolstering the basic principles of society. United States foreign policy can no longer be involved in the political games of other countries. Only by rallying around principles that command widespread response--principles concerned with basic human decencies and human rights and not with shadowy balance-of-power and balance-of-power strategies--can the United States succeed in the world political arena. If the United States works first toward truth in government, then world law can become the single objective of its foreign policy. (Author/JR)

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Truth in Government

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By NORMAN COUSINS
Editor, Saturday Review/World.

Telling the truth is the first business of government in an open society. In recent years, however, a strange new notion has gained ground—the idea that government has the right to decide what truths are to be told and when they are to be told.

This is not to say that truth has always been dispensed to the American people in an unbroken line from the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention through every President and every Administration until only recently. The big difference is that, in establishing an "intelligence" operation abroad in 1947, Congress, in effect, authorized our government to depart from truth and to practice secret violence, deceit, and subversion in our foreign policy. The underlying theory was that we were living in a hard, predatory, cloak-and-dagger world and that the only way to deal with a potential totalitarian enemy was to imitate him.

We may live in a world of plot and counterplot, but we also live in a world of cause and effect. Whatever the cause of the decision to legitimatize and regularize deceit abroad, the effect of the decision, ultimately and inevitably, was the extension of the practice of deceit at home as well.

For example, when the United States was involved in a coup against the neutralist government of Laos in 1960, we could not compartmentalize our denials. We could not tell the outside world that we had nothing to do with it

without expecting that the American people would be deceived along with everyone else. The United States violated its own public commitment to the legal government of Laos by helping to stage the coup headed by Phoumi Nosavan, an anti-neutralist who was also a relative of the premier of Thailand.

Officially and publicly, the United States recognized and supplied military aid to the government of Souvanna Phouma. But U.S. arms and ammunition flowed more smoothly to the rebels than to the government. The bizarre result was that the United States was financing and supplying the two non-Communist sides in a three-sided civil war. Both of "our" sides wore American uniforms; both shot American bullets out of American rifles; and on payday, both sides collected money for their soldiers from the United States, although the legal government faced "procedural delays" when it tried to get promised funds released. The beneficiary of this incredible folly was the pro-Communist Pathet Lao. Thus, the line dividing still another Asian country hardened.

For a long time, the American people knew none of these things. The principal failure, of course, is not that the U.S. government denied the truth to the American people and the world. The principal failure here is that we did things we had to deny. Truth by government is not just a matter of open admission and factual reporting. If truth means anything, it must be a total process, beginning with policies and actions of government and

extending through to the public information services.

Another prime liability of authorized lying in foreign policy is that it makes for bad habits. It makes officeholders casual about the practices of deception. In a world in which it is difficult to know where foreign policy ends and national policy begins, it is all too easy to transpose habits from one to the other. Not that lying is all right if we confine our lying to foreigners. My point, indeed, is that we went off the track the moment we went into the business of international deceit. From that point, it was only a short and convenient step to use deceit in the general affairs of government at home.

To assume that such abuses of power are chargeable only to men now in power is all too easy. We will be meeting only part of the total problem if we do no more than identify the rascals and throw them out. The cleansing process is essential, of course, but at some point soon we will have to go beyond names and faces and strengthen the basic structure of an open society.

Truth in government has to be institutionalized. It needs a life of its own that transcends the men who happen to be in charge of the machinery of government at any given time. This is what is meant by a government of laws rather than of men. This is what the main design produced by the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention of 1787 was all about.

But this design has been slipping away from us in recent years.

We have permitted exceptions from principle in the operation of our society, exceptions that cannot be accommodated or metabolized. We have made it possible for men in government to become bigger than the laws they have sworn to uphold.

The problem is not met just by changing men. The problem can only be met by giving increased attention to refurbishing and bolstering the basic principles of the society. Some of the main props of constitutional government are now so weakened by repeated misuse or abuse that they have to be redefined and restored.

There should be a test at the earliest possible moment of the constitutionality of any government agency that can spend large sums without public accounting or that can make decisions vitally affecting our foreign policy without constitutional sanction or that can engage in subversion abroad regardless of the fact that nothing is more basic in American history than respect for the right to self-determination of other peoples.

It is no accident that the Declaration of Independence begins with a reference to a "decent respect to the opinions of mankind." These words do not mean that all that is required is an awareness of the existence of other people. What they mean, if anything at all, is that this society is dedicated to the proposition that it is a human enterprise before it is a national enterprise and that the rights and welfare of other people are no less important than our own. [See "Education for Peace—Today" by Helen D. Wise in the November-

December 1973 issue of *Today's Education.*]

Some will say that we live in a chaotic and insecure world, that our style in the international arena is dictated by others, and that we have no choice but to play the game according to the way others play it.

Yet precisely because we have to take the world as it is, we must rise above the game to have an effect. We have to think carefully about our own role and what we can do that has some chance of working, rather than how best to compete in the game of combustible anarchy. We cannot expect to succeed in the world political arena by imitating the practices and actions we profess to condemn. We still succeed only as we represent a rallying center for principles that command widespread response—principles concerned with basic human decencies and human rights and not with shadowy balance-of-power or balance-of-terror strategies.

The proper model statesman for America in its world position today is not Prince Metternich but Thomas Jefferson. And if we are looking for philosophical guidelines, we will probably find that James Madison and William James have far more to say to us and for us than Niccolò Machiavelli.

We must see the world as it is: a world of anarchy, a world in which each nation regards its national security or national advantage as its primary and frequently its only concern. The sum total of all these individual national con-

cerns is an explosive mixture.

The problem of anarchy is viewed only in the small and not in the large. Everyone understands what happens when the machinery of law in a small community suddenly breaks down, but there is no comparable awareness of the dangers that confront every member of the human species because of the absence of law binding our nations. No rational process now exists, therefore, for assuring the basic safety of the human species. We stumble into the future day-to-day, dependent more on the hope that our margin for error may not have been completely used up than on a working design for a peaceful world.

It is not reasonable or logical to assume that national statesmen will lead the way in taming nations or eradicating basic weaknesses of the UN or developing a governed world. Do not expect, Alexander Hamilton wrote, nations to take the initiative in developing restraints upon themselves.

Governments are not built to perceive great truths. Only people can perceive great truths. Governments specialize in small and intermediate truths. Their people have to instruct them in great truths.

One great truth of our time is that the means for meeting the largest problems on earth do not yet exist. A single government is incapable individually of solving them. A single government cannot by itself keep the oceans from becoming a global sewer nor the sky a poisonous canopy. Nor can a

single government eliminate the need for military expenditures that cost the world's people $250 billion a year and dislocate economies all over the globe.

But there are some things an individual government can do. It can work with the large truth that our earth has to be governed. It can identify causes of world anarchy. It can present a great design for safeguarding our small planet and recognize that we are no longer dealing with narrow concerns but with the safety of the human habitat.

The American people are paying a fearsome price for the dominant condition of lawlessness among nations, which in turn affects conditions of life inside the United States. The lawlessness—

- Dominates the national budget.
- Is the prime cause of the inflation and the severe strain on our economy.
- Diverts energy, attention, and resources from our main needs.
- Subtracts from the quality of life.
- Caricatures our ideals.
- Creates a mood and a context in which the national security can all too easily be confused with the security of political parties or their leaders.
- Gives a President more personal options than he should have or than is healthy for the American people for him to have.

The big challenge, therefore, is to create a situation in which truth can live a less unnatural and precarious existence than at present and in which the right to know

does not depend on special dispensations. We can do this best by making the achievement of world law the central and open objective of the foreign policy of this country.

Any nation that comes forward with such a design can expect to be rebuffed. But there is a distinction between rebuff and defeat. There is no defeat for the American people when they tie themselves to the great idea that human intelligence is equal to human needs. Beyond the clamor of clashing ideologies and the preening and jostling of sovereign tribes, a safer and more responsible world is waiting to be created. □

Telling the truth is the first business of government in an open society.

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